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AUTHOR Riel, Arthur R., Jr.
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ABSTRACT

Higher education fails in preparing students for life as a result of unclearly defined educational objectives and the lack of a coherent philosophy. The first step toward a coherent philosophy of education is to require that anyone who graduates from college be able to communicate to the world clearly, precisely, and forcefully. The responsibility for effecting this objective falls on the shoulders of those educators in composition and communication. Currently, students express themselves in terms of what the teacher expects them to say or in terms of the fashionable orthodoxy acquired through the mass media. Instead, teachers should ask students to write about those things which they have never heard discussed and for which there are no preprogrammed expressions. For example, teachers might assign interpretations of what John Donne said about religion or introduce students to the ideas of George Herbert. (RB)

Arthur R. Riel, Jr.
Professor of English
Fairfield University
Fairfield, Connecticut 06430

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Our Philosophies and Our Failures

We educators claim that we like disagreement and discussion and questions. In my experience this is not often true. We really like only slight disagreement. We don't seem to want to handle disagreement or questions which are basic. Three times I have run into this problem. In the midst of discussions on education techniques, I have asked the basic question: will this technique of education help the student to face life? So far I have gotten a blank stare; everyone goes back to discussing trivia. Yet my question is the really important one. Apparently the educators involved did not want to face it. Let's ask it again today: are we really helping our students to face life?

I may make other unexpected comments this noon. Please be patient with me; I am something of a maverick. I don't accept the orthodoxy of many modern educators. If you really can't stand some of what I say, I give you permission to blame my foolishness on premature senility and on my unusual background. I do perhaps have an unusual background. When I was a kid, I was, in a sense, deprived. We did not have intellectual discussions at the supper table. I did not stay up into the night reading classical novels. It was the time of the Great Depression. My father owned a hardware store; my mother was the bookkeeper. I worked in the store, not for spending money, there was no spending money. I worked to help support the family. As a result, I barely had time for homework. I had almost no time for extracurricular acticities. I knew very little about Melville or Shakespeare or Whitman or T.S. Eliot.

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B ut there were things I did know about, things which kept me close to life. I knew about machine bolts, carriage bolts, lag bolts, toggle bolts, wood screws, machine screws, cap screws, set screws. I knew about rolled threads, cut threads, case-hardened threads, SAE threads, USS threads. I knew that screws and bolts came in flat head and round head and oval head and fillister head and hex head and hollow head. They came in brass and steel; they came in nickel plate and cadmium plate. I knew drills: tungsten steel and carbon steel--letter sizes and fraction sizes and number sizes. And I drove a truck to deliver these things to factories, to garages, and to mechanics.

Outside of homework, I read Popular Science and Popular Mechanics.

My high school and college were tough and disciplined. I never took a composition course. I did take, however, six years of Latin, five years of French, and four years of classical Greek. In college I majored in philosophy and education; in graduate school I majored in English literature. I studied speech as an extracurricular activity in college.

I spent almost three and a half years in the Navy as an enlisted man.

Why this long introduction? I want to explain why I see things differently. I want to explain why I see things always related to life. If my ideas seem strange, please be tolerant. I tend to see things from a different perspective. For example, next semester, I will teach seventeenth-century poetry. I am not terribly interested in scholarship and research. I am

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interested in this question: will my teaching this course help the world in any way? Will my students be better able to face the world because they have studied John Donne? Will my students be better able to communicate with the world because they studied John Donne?

Obviously communication is very important in facing life: communication unites me with my neighbor. Communication is, therefore, not an orgy of self-expression. Is our teaching of communication one of the reasons why students fear to face the world? Have our students a suspeicion that what they have learned to do in our classrooms is not what they will need to know when they graduate?

I have a couple of other strange ideas. My topic is "Our Philosophies and Our Failures." Concerning a philosophy of higher education, I think we have none. As a matter of fact, I hold that college faculties are destroying higher education. We don't know what we're doing and the public is beginning to realize that we don't know what we're doing. How many empty seats were there in freshman classes last September? What about the student who was overheard saying: "I can have bull sessions at home"?

Yes, we are destroying higher education through our lack of a philosophy. We don't know who should go to college. We aren't sure of what to do with a student when he is in college. And the public, very understandably, is not impressed with all our expensive uncertainties. Oh yes, we do know that college education is four years after high school, but we don't know what the college degree

should represent. What should a student achieve during those very expensive years?

I propose a first step toward a real philosophy of higher education: I propose that we in composition and communication proclaim that any one who graduates from college be able to communicate to the world clearly, precisely, forcefully. This is our part of the philosophy of higher education; we at least, know one of our goals.

I said that higher education had no philosophy; if it functions, it must have some sort of working philosophy, however. What is that philosophy? The working philosophy of higher education is this: KEEP THE KID ON THE KAMPUS, and, allied to this, KEEP THE KID HAPPY. I derive this philosophy from what I heard at Philadelphia (national convention of NCTE) and from readings in journals and articles on education. I assert and proclaim that this basic philosophy is one of the causes of our failures: our failures in higher education, our failures in teaching communication. Every curriculum reform and every curriculum, every innovation (innovation is the great word today), every aspect of curriculum seems to be organized about one central idea: the kid really doesn't want an education. In spite of this, we have to teach him to communicate well--clearly, simply, precisely, in ordinary standard English, not in term-paper English. We have to help the student through a long hard discipline. But what if the school has no compulsory composition course? What if the composition course is in competition with a lot of fancy and attractive electives? If we are not careful, our students will

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transfer out of our composition courses, as they transfer out of so many tough courses. But we "gotta keep them on the campus." We can't have too many transferring out of our composition courses. So what do we do? Instead of the hard demands of teaching effective composition, we stop worrying about relevant communication. We let the student stay in the ghetto of his dialect; maybe this way he'll pass the course. Or we give up compulsory composition courses altogether and graduate more illiterates than ever. Or we encourage the students to slide around in the morass of self-expression. And we even call it self-expression.

But the things they write tell us that there is no self-expression: they express, not self, but what the teacher expects them to say. They express the fashionable orthodoxy, or they express what the newspapers are saying; they express what the TV commentators are saying. The one thing they don't express is their own thought: they do not think their own thought; they do not know their own thought; they cannot know their own thought.

And what is it we ask them to express themselves about? Remember, we must keep them on the campus. We ask them to write about the modern and the relevant; we ask them to write about whatever interests them and excites them. So we actually assign for their writing, topics which they already know. And they write in words and phrases already programmed. Both we and they have succumbed to the attractiveness of the relevant. We assign topics such as the draft, ecology, pollution, race, freedom, poverty, religion, morals, women's rights. Our students have been reading and writing and listening on these subjects since early high school.

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Because these subjects are current, because they are emotionally loaded, they are not good material for reading and writing and thinking. The reading is careless; the writing and thinking have already been done. But more basic yet, the high school student and the early college student can't really think at all: he expresses preferences (I like this idea better than that idea); he contradicts his elders; he repeats formulas already prepared. These students do not think; they do not even know what thinking is. And they are not going to learn to think on subjects already so thoroughly submerged in stereotyped responses. When the ordinary student reads this current and relevant material, he does not read: he recognizes the subject; he thinks he knows what's there; he sees the fashionable stereotype, not what the author actually said.

How does the student write on these subjects? He writes with modules of preprogrammed expression. He does not write his own material at all, though he may sincerely think he does. He is really like a carpenter who can nail together the prefabricated parts of a house. Ask your students to write about Vietnam; ask them to write about Watergate; ask them about war; ask them about college curricula; ask the girls about women's lib. What will you get? Will you get a real personal thought expressed in real language? Not too often. You will ordinarily get snippets of prerecorded tape, snippets awkwardly glued together, tapes recorded by someone else. This is not English composition, though it often looks good to the inexperienced

We should consider giving students subjects for reading

which have not been popularly discussed. They will have to look to see what's there; they will actually have to read.

We should ask them to write about things which they have never heard discussed; they should write about things for which there are no preprogrammed expressions.

What about assigning interpretations of what John Donne said about religion? What about introducing the students to George Herbert? Our job is to break them from slavery, the slavery of current fashions and current style in thought. Then they will truly work toward expressing themselves; then they will express real things through themselves.